

Tennis Isn't An Irish Sport

by

Zak Minor

“We are on serve at an incredible 16 games to 15 in the fifth and final set of this marathon Wimbledon final. The chair umpire is calling for quiet after MacCormac went up 30-love on Jennings’ serve. Jennings took the first two sets in tiebreakers, but MacCormac has mounted an improbable comeback, leveling the match at two sets apiece. With no fifth set tiebreakers at Wimbledon, they will play on until one man wins by two games. Will it be MacCormac the upstart Irishman or Jennings the home crowd’s hope? Any thoughts, John?”

“At this point it could go either way, Cliff. The momentum is certainly in MacCormac’s favor though. He got off to a slow start, but his play hasn’t diminished since that second-serve ace to win the first point of the third set. He’s showing a lot of guts out there for a newcomer.”

“How important would a win be to Tim Jennings and the British fans?”

“An Englishman hasn’t won here in over sixty years. Wimbledon is the biggest sporting event of the year for the Brits. They’d love to have an Englishman win it and Jennings is quite frankly their best shot in years. They’re ecstatic to have him in the finals, but they want the win.”

“What about young Seamus MacCormac?”

“He’s the first Irish tennis player in the open era to have this level of success. The Irish aren’t known for their tennis, but Seamus MacCormac could change that by winning here today.”

“I’m certain there isn’t a household in Ireland that’s not tuned to this final. How sweet would a win be for the Irish over an Englishman at Wimbledon?”

“Indescribable. Bells would ring all over the Emerald Isle and MacCormac would be hailed as a modern Irish hero for embarrassing the English on their own turf. This is very big.”

“With that thought we rejoin play here on center court. The chair umpire has calmed the crowd. Jennings’ first serve skids off the service line but MacCormac pounces on it, ripping a crosscourt forehand that passes Jennings as he approaches the net!”

“Jennings didn’t see that coming! Fatigue is setting in, Cliff. He limped to the net that time and MacCormac knows it. Jennings is now down love-40 and MacCormac will have a break point for the match.”

“The few Irish fans in the stands are on their feet. Mostly MacCormac’s coaches and family, nobody else expected him to be here. The Union Jacks outnumber the tri-colored Irish flags by far but the Brits have been silenced. Love-40 the score. Break point. Championship point for young Seamus MacCormac of Ireland.”

“The Irish fans won’t be seated, Cliff. The chair umpire is calling for silence.”

“Jennings is waiting. The crowd is finally quiet. A hard, well-placed serve from the Brit.”

“It’s right up the T, but MacCormac gets his racket on it. A weak return, but back in play. Jennings is all over it. He’s not giving up that easily. A good volley at the net sends the ball to the back corner behind MacCormac. Not good enough! MacCormac spins around and rips a sizzling backhand up the line! But Jennings gets to it. Out of

pure instinct he sticks his racket out and clips the ball. It spins high into the air and finally comes down on MacCormac's side, but the Irishman is there! Unbelievable! He delivers a monster slam into the back corner and he has won the Wimbledon championship! Seamus MacCormac is Wimbledon champion!"

"He had to break to win and did it in style, breaking Jennings at love!"

"Listen to the Irish fans, Cliff. They're stomping their feet and singing 'God Save Ireland.' MacCormac has taken an Irish flag from his coach and is making a lap of the court with it draped over his shoulders. Listen to the Irish fans chant their countryman's name."

"MACCORMAC! MACCORMAC! MACCORMAC!"

I wake to hear my name being shouted. It doesn't occur to me that it's one voice and not a crowd of Irish tennis fans. Still lost in daydream, I stand and announce, "Your majesty, on behalf of Ireland, you can kiss my Irish bum!"

There's a round of applause and an explosion of laughter. I open my eyes to find myself in my fifth grade class and it's my classmates laughing and clapping. Mr. Hennessy doesn't think it's very funny and yells my name again.

"MACCORMAC! Get up here and give your report."

"Report, sir?" I don't know about any report. I was probably daydreaming when he assigned it. That happens a lot.

"The report on what you'll be when you grow up, MacCormac. Assuming you manage to pass this class." The class laughs again. Mr. Hennessy always has to get the last laugh.

"Oh...that report. Of course, sir." It's lucky I know exactly what I will be.

I walk slowly to the front of the room because the other boys will beat you up if they think you're eager to get up in front of the class. But I am eager. I get to the front of the room and start to talk.

"I'm going to play professional tennis."

There they go laughing again. Mr. Hennessy shakes his head. He's probably thinking of something to say so he can get the last laugh. I keep talking.

"I'm going to be the greatest tennis player in the history of Ireland. I'll win the Davis Cup for our country and win Wimbledon every year to spite the English."

The laughing gets so loud there's no point in going on. The only ones not laughing are Mr. Hennessy and my best friend, Garbhan O'Connell. Garbhan's a tall fella with shaggy red hair hanging down in front of his eyes. Mam says Garbhan's name means 'little rough one.' Except for little, that's Garbhan. He's a scrapper and he always beats up the other boys when they pick on me because I'm smaller than the rest of them. He says it's not right for the big to pick on the little.

Mr. Hennessy says, "Tennis isn't an Irish sport, MacCormac. Try football or some other such sport." The class laughs again and Mr. Hennessy tells me to sit down, satisfied because he got the last laugh.

I'm glad when class is over and I can walk home with Garbhan. He makes sure none of the boys tease me about wanting to play tennis. Garbhan's like me. He's got no father either and we both live in the poor part of Cork because our mothers don't make much money.

Garbhan's got an older sister and three younger brothers. Mam says we're lucky it's just the two of us and not a bunch of kids to feed, but I secretly wish I had a brother to be my doubles partner.

Garbhan and I have to walk through the alleys to get home. We walk through dirty water and rotten garbage, holding our noses. Whoever keeps talking about the beautiful green of the country sure ain't talking about the alleys and streets of Cork's poortown. There's a drunk begging for money for another pint. We tell him we don't have any, which is true.

Garbhan says his dad was a drunk and mine was too. That's not true. Garbhan thinks everybody's father is a drunk because his was. My dad wasn't a drunk. He was just no good. I like tennis because he liked football. He was supposed to be a professional player until he hurt his knee and couldn't play. He married mam before it happened and they had me soon after. Dad was planning on the football money to pay for everything. Then he got hurt and couldn't keep a job. One day, when I was four, he didn't come home and we haven't seen him since. I don't miss him. If he ever came back I'd tell him to leave and we're doing fine without him.

Garbhan and I get to the tenement house we live in and mam is home between jobs. She gives us some toast with jam and she's off to her next job. It's all I'll have until breakfast, but I don't complain because I know mam is doing the best she can. Mam likes Garbhan because he protects me and she feels sorry for his mother because she has so many children. She won't be home until after I'm asleep. Garbhan and I sit on the front steps of the tenement house, eating our toast.

Garbhan finally asks, “What do you know about tennis?” That’s Garbhan. He thinks about something for hours before he comes out and asks about it.

“I know everything. I watch matches on the telly in the department store and hear about them on the radio. I know all the players.”

“Like who?”

“McEnroe’s the best.”

“Sounds like an Irishman.”

“He’s American.”

“It’s an Irish name.”

“Yeah, but *I’m* gonna be the best Irish tennis player ever.”

“Have ya ever played the game?”

“Do you see any tennis courts?” The truth is I’ve never touched a racket.

“I guess not. Well how do you play? I mean, what are the rules?”

“There’s lots of rules.”

“Go on and tell ‘em then.”

I don’t want to get into the complicated rules of tennis, but Garbhan looks insistent. I pull a pencil and paper from my bag and draw a rough sketch of a tennis court. I point to each of the areas and name them. I tell him about the net, the baseline, the backcourt, the service boxes, the alleys and everything else. So far, he follows me. I tell him what serving is. I tell him how you alternate service boxes from point to point and when to switch sides of the court and he’s still with me. I tell him the names of all the types of shots and he understands everything. Then I try to tell him how to keep score.

“No score is called love,” I say.

“Love? That’s silly. What for?”

“It’s French I think.”

“Why not zero or nil or no score?”

“They just don’t. You going to listen or complain?”

“I’m listening,” he promises but mumbles to himself, “French scoring.”

“The points go Love then 15 then 30 then 40 then Game.”

“You get 15 points for one score?”

“It’s just called 15. It’s really only one point. If you get four points, you win.”

“I see.”

“But you have to win by two points.” Garbhan looks confused. “If both players have a score of forty it’s called deuce. One of the players has to win two points in a row to win the game.”

“So all you have to do is win four points and you won the whole game? Sounds like a short game.”

“That’s only one game. To win the whole match you have to win two out of three or three out of five sets.”

“What?”

We go on like that for an hour. I tell Garbhan about sets and matches and tournaments and he says he understands but I don’t think he does. It’s getting dark so we go up to Garbhan’s flat where his mother watches me until it’s time to go to bed. Garbhan walks with me to the door of my flat.

“I think I might like to play tennis too, Seamus,” Garbhan says.

“That’s grand. We can learn together and be doubles partners.”

Garbhan smiles and walks back to his flat. I’m happy because it’s hard to play tennis by yourself. Over the next few weeks, I take Garbhan to the department store and we watch tennis whenever it’s on. He picks it up quick.

One day, early in the morning, Garbhan takes me to the rich part of town. I’m scared because he wants me to climb over a brick wall with a big sign on it that says in great bold letters ‘**Private Club. Members Only.**’ But I climb it anyway with a boost from Garbhan and find myself on the grounds of one of those high-class tennis clubs. The rising sun is shining on ten hard courts and five grass courts. I can’t believe my eyes. The lines are perfect and white as snow just like on the telly. It’s the first bit of real, green Irish grass I’ve ever seen in Cork.

We run around, jumping over the nets and rolling in the grass until Garbhan looks into an unlocked shack. There’s plenty of tennis balls and rackets to be found and we play, badly, until we hear people coming. We take two of the older rackets and some of the balls with us. I know it’s stealing, but I figure we’re gonna be Irish tennis heroes one day so what should it matter? We come back every morning to play and get pretty good.

The next few months are splendid. We climb the wall of the club every morning and leave before anyone comes. For three months we have our own private tennis club, just Garbhan and me. While other boys are eating breakfast or singing in the church choir, we’re practicing to be the greatest tennis players Ireland’s ever known.

We get away with it too until one day the groundskeeper shows up early. He sees us playing on one of the courts and comes for us. We drop our rackets and run to the wall. Garbhan’s got to give me a boost because I’m short. I’m over the wall and waiting

for Garbhan, but I hear the groundskeeper grab him. He's yelling that he's done nothing wrong and that tennis and the green Irish grass are for everyone and not just the rich. I don't want to leave him, but I'm scared. I run home.

I wait for Garbhan to come home, but he doesn't. The next day, his mother says he's been sent to a reformatory. I don't see Garbhan anymore. Mam's mad because she knows I was probably with Garbhan.

At the end of the school year, mam and I go to live with her brother in America where mam says we won't be so poor and I won't get into trouble. I miss Garbhan. I wish I knew what happened to him. I don't play tennis anymore. I don't have anyone to play with.

There are other sports though. Americans are mad for baseball. I give it a try. My cousins and I join a little league and I get to like it. I even play a bit in high school. Sometimes though, before a game starts and I'm standing in the outfield and the sun is shining on my face and the grass is green, green as Ireland, I remember that tennis club in Cork and I remember Garbhan. Then the game starts and I forget all about that.

I don't get into trouble in America. I date. I fall in love a couple of times. My heart is broken a couple of times. I learn to drive. I graduate from high school. My grades are good and I'm accepted to college at Trinity in Dublin. I go home to Ireland early to get ready for my first year of college. I find a flat and move my things in.

I don't know anyone in Dublin and I'm months early for school. So I take a bus to Cork to see the city of my childhood. We drive down the coast of the Irish Sea. It sparkles like it never did in my youth. I step off the bus in Cork and go straight to my old flat. I'm hoping Garbhan's mother is there and maybe even old Garbhan himself. If he's

not I'm sure his mother'll tell me what's become of him. But she's not there. The building's been torn down and nobody knows anything about any Mrs. O'Connell and her five kids from the old days.

I walk the city for hours until I find myself at that same brick wall in front of me and Garbhan's old tennis club. The same sign is there to keep the poor children of Ireland out. I hate that sign. I hate that wall. I hate that club. I hate them all for taking Garbhan away just because he was too poor to play tennis.

There's nothing for me in Cork. I get on the first bus to Dublin and walk to my flat. I think about Garbhan and how we were supposed to be Irish tennis heroes.

With nothing to do and Garbhan on my mind, I decide to watch the Wimbledon finals for old times' sake. I haven't watched tennis in years. It feels good to be back in Ireland and watching tennis on my own telly in my own flat instead of through the window of a department store.

I turn on the telly and switch around until I find the Wimbledon coverage. I find it and can't believe my eyes. An Irishman is playing against an Englishman in the finals. The Irishman's a tall fella with shaggy red hair hanging down over a green, white, and orange headband. Great God, it's Garbhan O'Connell! The commentators confirm it by announcing his name. Garbhan O'Connell is in the Wimbledon finals. I can't believe it. That reformatory must have had one fine tennis court.

For the next four hours, I watch Garbhan play better than I ever dreamed I could play and I watch him win. Voices from the other flats erupt with 'God Save Ireland.' It turns out everyone in the country is watching. I cry tears of joy because my old friend, poor like me in youth, is a modern Irish hero and I sing louder than anyone else. Garbhan

doesn't tell the Queen of England to kiss his Irish bum when he accepts the trophy, but I know he's thinking it.

There are celebrations in the streets and all over Ireland tonight. Who says tennis isn't an Irish sport?